

Rereading Of The Clausewitz War

Free Reflection

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Tactique générale

Surprisingly rich but paradoxically little known, "On War" proposes a description, and not a prescription of war by Clausewitz for whom theory is an observation, not a doctrine. The modernity of the work and its importance in the current strategic debate naturally makes it the possible and desirable leaven of a European defence doctrine.

1/ THE AUTHOR :

Like many officers of his generation, Lieutenant-Colonel Benoît Durieux has a good operational experience, but his career has been distinguished by his career is also distinguished by the studies he has followed, which are periods that are conducive to reflection on military affairs and defence in general.

A Saint-cyrien and infantryman, he began his career at the Foreign Legion, where he took part in several operations in the Balkans and Africa. A time assigned to the Directorate General of Armament, where he prepared the competitive examination for higher military scientific and technical education, he graduated from the Institute of Political Studies in Paris and Georgetown University (USA). He is currently in charge of studies at the studies/prospects unit of the French Army's coordination-anticipation-piloting body (ICAP).

Although he can defend himself out of modesty, he is very close to Clausewitz, whose career "alternates between wide and narrow interests", as he himself points out. He himself stresses that his career "alternates periods of reflection, moments of intense action and phases of privileged observation with the leaders of a political and military world in the throes of change".

2/ THE WORK :

Naturally marked by Carl von Clausewitz, whose thought strongly permeates American strategic thinking, Benoît Durieux proposes in his book to reconstruct the essence of the major work of the Prussian general, to "testify to its fruitfulness". More than an additional study on a treaty that has been dissected many times, he seeks to make available to all, and in particular in the institution of defense, the Clausewitzian keys to understanding the phenomenon of war, in order to systematically decipher current debates on the meaning and conduct of modern conflicts. Finally, anxious to remain both concrete and forward-looking, it shows how its fetish author proposes the possible ferments of a European strategic doctrine.

The book is therefore an applied synthesis as well as a commented summary of the treaty "On War". It includes a long introduction in which the author gives us his understanding of the work and, above all, of its spirit, demonstrating its modernity and its usefulness in a European defence community to be founded. It is then divided into three main parts, each of which contains a summary-synthesis of the eight books of the German thinker's original text. The thematic index at the end of the book also makes it a practical document in which we find precise elements for understanding and reflecting on the profession of arms.

Without wishing to neglect the author's impressive work of proofreading and synthesis, this fact sheet focuses on presenting the spirit of the book's introduction. It is in this introduction that Lieutenant-Colonel Durieux shares with us the fruits of his profound reflection on this "monument to the history of intelligence" whose influence extends far beyond military affairs.

3/ SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Surprisingly rich but paradoxically little known, "On War" offers a description, and not a prescription of war by Clausewitz for whom theory is indeed an observation, and not a doctrine. The modernity of the work and its importance in the current strategic debate naturally makes it the possible and desirable leaven of a European defence doctrine.

Modernity of Clausewitz

Far from being limited to a few key quotations, the Treaty offers a lasting description of the war, while showing a much greater scope, in the field of strategy and pure philosophy. First of all because Clausewitz is the privileged witness of a troubled period marked by the war and its developments. Then because he is the thinker of complexity, and in that he describes the very same phenomenon that our era observes, characterized by diversity, dispersion and asymmetry.

Like Guibert at the same time, he observes that the science of war has become larger and more difficult. Nevertheless, he adds that this complexity has less to do with the very nature of warfare than with the lack of means of analysis and understanding. The book should therefore be considered as an analytical tool, particularly suited to understanding periods of major change.

Unfinished and published after the death of the Prussian general, "On War" comprises eight books. In the first, the most complete, it defines first of all the essence of the war. He thus develops some major notions; that of limitation, contrary to what some commentators of the work have often made believe by asserting that Clausewitz conceptualized total war, and the important notion of friction. He poses the paradigm of the "paradoxical trinity", people, army, government. Finally, he places man at the center of

the phenomenon by analyzing the interactions of war with human behavior.

The book then sets out the main methodological tools that Clausewitz used in his study. In particular, it defines the historical criticism that should make it possible to assess the decisions of the great historical leaders and to deduce a method of tactical reasoning.

Finally, in the following books, the author discusses the main components of warfare, including the factors dimensioning a campaign, the commitment, its decision, the way it brings victory, the attack and defence in general. Returning to the subject as a whole, he states that reality must not be confined to overly fussy schemes, and that theory is less about finding the right solution than about ruling out the wrong ones.

Throughout his work, Clausewitz shows a valuable pedagogy, as a good teacher that he was. Combining reality and theory in a continuous process of coming and going, he shows that study is necessary because it allows us to move from the objective form of knowledge to the subjective form of power: "theory...is intended to educate the mind of the future warlord, let us say rather to guide his self-education and not to accompany him on the battlefield...".

Clausewitz in the strategic debate

The modernity of his work explains the bubbling of ideas that he is today the initiator of, particularly in the United States.

The Americans truly rediscovered it at the end of the Vietnam War. After a period marked by the limited use of power due to the Cold War, they sought to understand their Vietnamese setback through the use of a Clausewitzian reading grid. From the 1980s to the present day, the influence of the treaty has extended to strategic doctrine as well, with the affirmation of the Powell doctrine. (1) and the technical-operational field where it is the basis of information warfare theories.

For all that, American strategic and operational thinking cannot be considered as the reincarnation of Clausewitz's theory. Starting from the principle enunciated by the Prussian general that in real war, it is necessary to try to approach the conditions of the ideal war, that is to say an intense and autonomous discharge of violence, it comes to a certain independence (2) of the military versus the political, once operations have begun.

This autonomy of military action has led to several strong tendencies, relatively opposed to the Clausewitzian theses, tending to bring war as close as possible to its ideal concept. First of all, the constraints imposed by time must be limited or even eliminated by compressing it. By developing the concepts of parallel warfare and rapid dominance, operations must be as brief and decisive as possible, whereas the Treaty defines waiting as a fundamental part of military action.

This first trend then leads to the necessary destruction of the adversary and its centre of gravity. This notion and that of the primacy of the destruction of the adversary's forces, developed in the book, are taken to the letter by American military thought, which thus brings the political and military goals of operations much closer together and, as a corollary, rules out operations of limited warfare. However, Clausewitz specifies that it is more a question of killing the enemy's courage than his warriors.

Finally, seeking to control the fog and friction of war through the technological development of information warfare (the digitization of the battlefield), the Americans deny the very nature of war according to the German philosopher.

In his thesis, the two concepts result from the opposition of two wills in a non-linear phenomenon that is more a matter of chaos theory than a rational process.

In the end, Clausewitz and his theories would have played a triple role for American military thought. That of ferment of renewal, of reservoir of concept and doctrinal reference. This role could be the same for a nascent European strategy.

Clausewitz, leaven of a European strategic doctrine

Shaped by conflict, European nations learned that war was only a moment in their political relations and that it should be kept to a minimum, in particular by restricting it if possible to the military field. The work of Clausewitz distinguishes between the description and the prescription of the phenomenon, and a common defence policy for the European Union should find in it the leaven of a true strategic doctrine.

When the author states that war is a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, he reminds us that it does not break relations with the adversary, who remains the partner of a political dialogue (between the three spheres of the paradoxical trinity) which in this case takes a violent and armed form. In this confrontation of two wills, it is indeed a matter of exhausting the adversary-partner's will by making him feel the improbability of success or its exorbitant cost.

Moreover, the complex system of the paradoxical trinity organizes the relations between its three spheres in such a way as to guarantee them a certain controlled freedom of action. Contrary to the Warden doctrine, which conceives of the enemy as a system with five concentric circles (3) which must be struck simultaneously, this trinity conditions the limitation of war guaranteed by a triple separation.

The first is the political and the military. It allows the political to be protected from military logic and to exercise its pre-eminence to limit violence. The second tends to confine the effects of warlike violence to the military sphere. In addition to protecting the population, it allows the belligerents to keep their political system intact, as the only one capable of exercising a negotiating role. Finally, the third separation clearly delimits wartime from peacetime, through the use of the declaration of war and the peace treaty.

But this Clausewitzian vision may seem outdated today in the face of terrorism. Difficult to apprehend, this phenomenon can be seen as an extension of war to the whole of society, attacking the cohesion of society and thus coming closer to absolute war. Faced with this asymmetrical threat, the answer could be to bring the expression of this violence back into the military field. On the margins of political, economic and police responses, the military in its sphere should then accept to limit its power and therefore the balance of power, in order not to push the opposing will to the asymmetrical solution.

However, this approach is, to say the least, delicate to apply and should lead to the enactment of a number of principles inspiring a common European strategy. The first of these must be to preserve the separation of the exercise of violence, by distancing it from military and political fora on the one hand and strictly maintaining the monopoly of armed violence by the military corporation on the other. This would also imply finding an alternative to the declaration of war, the use of which is no longer adapted to modern geopolitics.

The second principle must be to give priority to the human factor in modes of action and organisation. That is to say, to prefer the projection of forces to long-distance strikes, in order to assert one's presence while maintaining contact with the adversary. Or to give a

strong emphasis to command structures that preserve the subordinate's freedom of action.

Finally, in parallel with a reminder of its primacy, the politician must retain the ability and will to decide on high-intensity operations, ready to risk going to extremes to promote and defend the values that Europe stands for. Clausewitz in this respect is in a position to prevent Europe from succumbing to the temptation of the strategy of The European Union should not be tempted to annihilate its adversary, without falling into an irenic angelicism advocating the end of the "military order".

4/ ANALYSIS - OPINION OF THE EDITOR :

"Rereading Clausewitz's War", by Lieutenant-Colonel Durieux, is primarily intended to offer a commented reading of the famous treatise, following the example of several other strategy books in the collection *Stratégies et doctrines aux éditions Economica* (4). Clear and concise, it allows one to easily but distinctly become acquainted with this work, whose original format may deter a potential reader. As a preamble, the introduction makes it possible to quickly understand the heart of Clausewitz's thought, and to grasp its fruitfulness and modernity. In this respect, the objective of this work seems to have been perfectly achieved.

But beyond the actual presentation of the Prussian general's text, Benoît Durieux offers an analysis of the results of his thought. Without seeking to impose a fixed vision of it, he opens up many avenues of reflection on the basis of the theories of his subject.

Thus, his analysis of the Clausewitzian influence on American military thought shows how and to what extent the treaty has profoundly modified the outreatlantic doctrine in force over the last thirty years. In doing so, he gives a grid for reading the recent strategic and operational choices of the United States. It also demonstrates the visionary character of Clausewitz, who describes in his treatise the principles driving this evolution, and in particular the tendency of the military to free itself from politics in order to conduct a war that comes closer to the ideal model.

Although the author's study is rigorous, he nevertheless loses touch with the realities of his time. Aware that the answer to the problem is by no means restricted to the military, he proposes a possible application of Clausewitzian principles to counter the most significant modern form of the threat, terrorism. However, he remains too succinct on this subject, and although it is not the subject of his book, the reader would like to see this reflection taken further.

Finally, Lieutenant-Colonel Durieux also knows how to draw practical lessons from a book whose pedagogy and ability to promote reflection he praises. Thus, emphasizing Clausewitz's insistence on the central place of man and his will within military organizations, he reminds us that the organization of these systems and in particular command systems must remain faithful to this principle. At a time when the army is equipping itself with NATO-style command posts, with heavy and highly mechanical standardised procedures, this reflection is far from being out of place.

Based on a major - even founding - text in the field of warfare and military matters in general, Lieutenant-Colonel Durieux's book is obviously a synthesis of many profound reflections on the subject. Through a clear and precise language, it gives the reader the possibility to follow him easily in his reflections. But beyond that, it gives him the

opportunity to pursue his observations by providing effective keys to understanding current problems and effective tools for reflection.

(1) It defines the conditions for the United States to engage in a conflict: the vital interests of the country under threat, the military option as a last resort, the volume of force sufficient for victory to be certain; finally, the political objective must be clear and the commitment must have the support of public opinion.

(2) Emphasised by Zbigniew Brzezinski in an interview with the Express in 2001, for whom the American military "are in no way followers of Clausewitz; for them military means must obey, above all, military decisions".

(3) The central strategic command, the organic functions, the infrastructures, the population, the armed forces.

(4) Including Machiavelli's Claw and Sun-Tzu's Art of War.

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